



National Security Brief | Précis sur la sécurité nationale

Arrests at the Coutts Blockade: Complex Motivations

Accurate as of February 14, 2022

Freedom of expression is constitutionally protected in Canada; CSIS investigative thresholds may be met once a threat actor facilitates or advocates for serious violence in support or furtherance of ideological, political or religious objectives with the intent of affecting societal change. CSIS does not investigate lawful advocacy, protest or dissent, unless it is carried out in conjunction with any of the activities outlined in paragraphs 2(a) to (d) of the CSIS Act.

The purpose of this preliminary assessment is to provide a broader understanding of the recent events at the Coutts, Alberta blockade and possible implications across the broader anti-public health measures movement (APHMM).

Key Points

The recent discovery by the RCMP of firearms and ammunition and the subsequent arrest of 13 individuals who hold extreme anti-government views highlights the potential for a small violent cell to obfuscate itself within a broader movement.

The Service has no indication of the presence of a similar cell within the Ottawa occupation.

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Background

Participants at Coutts blockade, as with the Ottawa occupation, are motivated by their opposition to some—if not all—public health restrictions relating to COVID 19. Their collective anger is directed primarily at the Prime Minister of Canada, the Liberal Party of Canada and, to a lesser degree, provincial premiers and public health officials. The Freedom Convoy 2022 is the broad cause (i.e., support for truckers) around which numerous diverse individuals are willing to converge. Many of the participants have little to no connection to the trucking industry, but merely view the protest as an opportunity to voice their own personal or ideological grievances. Key narratives are not homogenous; in fact, protestors espouse a range of grievances (often intertwined with conspiracy theories) in support of their opposition to public health measures. Within the broader APHMM are a very small number of ideologically

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motivated violent extremists (IMVE) who are willing to engage in serious violence in order to achieve their objectives.

A partial blockade at the Coutts border crossing started on January 29, 2022, with two blockade sites emerging. The first was adjacent to the village of about 250 people, near the border. Protesters there blocked the highway, and used the Smugglers Saloon, a roadside tavern, as their home base. A second protest emerged about 14 kilometres north, where police had established a checkpoint in early February to limit access to Coutts, as protest numbers grew. Demonstrators gathered at the checkpoint, parking their idling equipment metres from the police barricade. Over the course of the blockade, protesters had intermittently allowed transport trucks to pass, though the Canada Border Services Agency temporarily closed the Coutts crossing.

The Coutts blockade began as part of the APHMM, driven by a similar range of narratives and personal grievances as seen at the Ottawa occupation. The RCMP notes that several of the participants at the blockade are members of Diagonal (see text box at right, including Diagonal flag on body armour seized on February 13, 2022). s.38

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As the Coutts blockade continued, various factions and leaders emerged, thereby reflecting the fractured nature of the blockade and making negotiations by the RCMP difficult. The RCMP is the police of jurisdiction and is aware of key players within the blockade.

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Understanding Diagonal

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s.38 The group combines a staunch anti-government narrative with opposition to all forms of public health restrictions related to COVID-19. Several members of Diagonal have military experience.

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On February 13, 2022, the RCMP served three warrants (one house, two trailers and a saloon (noted above)) related to activity at the Coutts blockade. The RCMP subsequently located 13 long guns, two hand guns, a large volume of ammunition and body armour. The RCMP arrested 13 individuals described by the RCMP, identified as the core extreme protestors. s.38

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Outlook

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CSIS assesses that, given the violent rhetoric behaviour of the core group, they would more likely fall within s. 2(c) as opposed to s. 2(d) (referred to as subversion) of the *CSIS Act*.

CSIS assesses that the arrest of the 13 individuals could serve to de-escalate this situation for those holding moderate views; however, it could actually serve to galvanize the position of those who hold more extreme views

The Canadian Militia Movement

Those within the Canadian Militia Movement portray themselves as patriots who are dedicated to protecting the "freedom of Canadians" as they believe defined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. They have traditionally believed that the federal government is collaborating with shady domestic and international entities and/or elites (liberals, communists, big business, the United Nations, etc.) in order to strip Canadians of their firearm and freedom of speech rights.

The Militia Movement has increasingly focussed on other perceived enemies, including Antifa, Black Lives Matter (BLM) and, more recently, national and sub-national-level officials who are attempting to impose pandemic-related restrictions.

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